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CHILDREN OF THE STAGE.

BY ELBRIDGE T. GERRY, PRESIDENT OF THE SOCIETY FOR THE
PREVENTION OF CRUELTY TO CHILDREN.

THE American people love novelty. Like the Athenians of old, their great pleasure is either to hear or to tell some new thing. This is particularly the case with their amusements. Novelty at the present day is essential to the success of every exhibition. It is that alone which gives zest to the modern opera and drama, and when it ceases public interest in the performance also ceases.

For many years past there has been a tendency on the part of theatrical agents and brokers, with a view towards reaping a pecuniary advantage from the exhibition, to train and exhibit very young children of both sexes in what is known as the stage-children business. These are picked up usually under contract with their parents, who are tempted by their own indigent circumstances, and by specious promises of future prominence in the theatrical or operatic profession, to place their children in the hands of these agents, for a limited period and with very little guarantee, if any, that the terms of the contract will be carried out, or the result such as the promise would indicate. Gathered into troupes, the children are then drilled into a so-called musical performance of some light opera, or in some silly little song or dance ; they are taught the gestures, walk, and action of the minor business of the stage, or are required to learn the libretto of the opera by heart, and are instructed how to render it for the approval of the audience. They are then exhibited in various theatres throughout the country, at all seasons of the year when an engagement can be obtained ; and so long as the novelty of the exhibition continues and money is made, the exhibitions are frequent.

After a while, when the novelty wears off and the public refuses to patronize the performances, the troupe is broken up, frequently by the person in charge disbanding the children in some

distant city. But wherever this disbanding occurs, the children have no future. Their voices prematurely strained and used, their physical systems broken down by constant exposure to the draughts of the theatre and the loss of sleep incidental to late nocturnal performances, render them utterly unfit for employment in any legitimate operative business. And as their education in the theatrical line has been of the most meagre description, none of them secures any position in that profession. Then opens the only market for what is left of them—the low variety dives, dime museums, and drinking-saloons in our great city. These are not mere matters of supposition. The Societies for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, instituted by wise legislatures in the several States throughout the Union for the enforcement of the laws for the protection of children, possess the details of too many cases where the result is as stated.

Now, the true secret of the success of the American people as a nation is in its care for the young. In every State in the Union laws have been framed with the utmost care for the protection of children of tender years not merely against brutal assaults and wilful neglect, but also against the rapacity of ignorant or avaricious parents or guardians, who seek by the public exhibition of the children in theatrical performances to put money in their own pockets. The principle upon which such laws are based is a broad one. The State as the sovereign protects each individual member of its future constituency in the enjoyment of health, vitality, and education, to the end that boys shall, on arriving at maturity, be physically capable of bearing arms in defence of the State and of intelligently exercising the elective franchise; and that girls, on becoming women, shall be so capable of properly discharging the maternal function and of educating their offspring that the physical and intellectual material of the body politic shall not be destroyed or impaired. And the laws governing theatrical exhibitions of children forbid such exhibitions under the age of sixteen as the limit of such protection and as the legislative result of an elaborate and careful investigation into the relative physical strength of children.

Theatres in our large cities are divisible into three classes: (1) reputable, where only the legitimate drama is exhibited to audiences composed of cultured and intelligent people; (2) semi-reputable, where the stage is devoted to spectacular exhibitions,

vulgarly, but appropriately, termed "leg drama," the scanty costumes in which barely evade the prohibition of the Penal Code on the subject of decency; (3) disreputable, where both dialogue and performances fester with indelicacy, and the audience, composed of the lowest and most degraded class of society, engage in smoking and drinking as an adjunct of their enjoyment of the exhibition.

Now, it is an elementary rule of the criminal law that the letter of the statute which is aimed to suppress an evil must be sufficiently comprehensive in its language to cover it. The application of the law necessarily depends on the circumstances of each particular case. Thus the wilful exhibition of a child within the age, when in a sick and suffering condition, in a reputable theatre, would result in a severe punishment of the manager, on conviction; but to prosecute him in the absence of such facts and merely for a violation of the letter of the law, while followed necessarily by conviction, would result in only a merely nominal sentence. On the other hand, the exhibition of children in the other two classes of theatres, where there was not only danger of their health being injured, but of their morals being corrupted, would be dealt with by the courts in a much more vigorous manner. And the reasons that exist for the necessity of the law, which will be next considered, commend themselves to the consideration of every person whose sympathies are enlisted in the protection of the helpless.

First, the exhibitions prohibited are physically injurious to the children. They deprive them of their natural rest and subject them to unnecessary physical efforts, which engender disease. Thus a child of tender years is forced to sing and dance at night, half-clad in scanty theatrical costume, in a theatre where the draughts are incessant, and where the exertion of the performance constantly overheats the system so as to render the exposure still more dangerous. Encores frequently compel additional exertions, until at the close of the performance, tired and worn out, the child goes from the theatre through the cold and wet of the streets to gain such little sleep as the late hour and its exhausted system permit. In the recent "Bluebeard, Jr.," case some seven little children between five and nine years old, living in Brooklyn, were repeatedly followed from the theatre through rain and storm to their residences, some three miles distant and on the other

side of the East River. They did not reach their homes until half an hour after midnight, and were then so tired as to be found asleep in the cars; and this occurred night after night in succession while the play was produced.

In the next place, when such children are exhibited in the daytime, they lose their education. In all such exhibitions, whether at night or by day, much time is spent at rehearsals; so that, apart from the question of physical exhaustion, which unfits them for study, they have no opportunity of obtaining proper education, for which the State makes ample provision alike for the rich and poor, and which is the best capital in this country to insure success in life. Said the Hon. Grover Cleveland, in a recent speech: "In every enlightened country the value of popular education is fully recognized, not only as a direct benefit to its recipients, but as an element of strength and safety in organized society. Considered in these aspects, it should nowhere be better appreciated than in this land of free institutions, consecrated to the welfare and happiness of its citizens and deriving its sanction and power from the people. Here the character of the people is inevitably impressed upon the government, and here our public life can no more be higher and purer than the life of the people than a stream can rise above its fountain or be purer than the spring in which it has its source. Teaching the children of our land to read is but the first step in the scheme of creating good citizens by means of free instruction." Children of tender years have a natural disinclination to study. Hence the law makes education compulsory. But when children are used in these exhibitions, their minds are never in a fit condition to study, for when not actually performing they are absorbed with their stage business, which to them is far more palatable. And they gain nothing in return for the loss of their education. Singing in public at an early age almost invariably strains and cracks the vocal chords, and in many cases what with care might in time have proved to be a fine voice has been prematurely wrecked and destroyed. Of course they cry when not permitted to perform. Children proverbially cry when deprived of what is hurtful to them. They enjoy the performance on account of the excitement, the glare of the footlights, their brilliant tinsel costumes, and the applause of the audience, which flatters their vanity. They know nothing of the evil results—how should they?

Again, the associations are bad for the children. In the spectacular plays alluded to they are constantly brought into contact with persons about whose morality or virtue the less said the better. Constantly exhibiting in such troupes, the girls soon lose all modesty and become bold, forward, and impudent. When they arrive at the limit-age of the law, they have usually entered on the downward path and end in low dance-houses, concert-saloons, and the early grave which is the inevitable conclusion of a life of debauchery. The boys, unfitted by their idle life for useful work, find employment for a time in the lowest class of theatres, and end by becoming thieves or tramps. Neither boys nor girls ever attain any position in the legitimate theatrical profession, which requires a very different preliminary education and training.

The preposterous assertion is frequently made that these little children are "lawfully earning their living" by these exhibitions, and that therefore the law is harsh and oppressive, and should not be enforced. Let us look at this for a moment. The law compels parents to support their children during their tender years, and nowhere sanctions the reverse of this rule. If parents are unable to provide for their children, the law provides institutions for that purpose. No parent has any right to profit pecuniarily by the exhibition of a child within the prohibited age, for the reason that within that age the law asserts the child to be incapable of so exhibiting without injury to itself. It was to protect children from being used in these theatrical exhibitions in order to make money for their parents or guardians that the law was passed, just as it forbids their use in begging, peddling, or in factories. The children are wretchedly paid—usually about forty cents a night; they rarely have any supper during or after the performance, and they seldom live to grow up. Those who clamor for their employment are influenced solely by pecuniary reasons. Past history of the juvenile opera furnishes a sad illustration of the truth of this. More than one such company has been recruited from the children of the poor, their parents being beguiled by specious praise of the talents of the children, or by promises and part payment of money. Then the start on the road with no one to look after them, the champagne suppers with gilded youth of the town after the performance, the ruin of the children as the inevitable result, the ultimate disappearance of the treasurer of the troupe with the funds when far out West, the

finding of the girls in the only homes of vice left to them, and, finally, the agonizing appeals of the parents for a rescue, often too late,—these furnish cogent reasons why the evil should be nipped in the bud when the attempt is made to engraft the song-and-dance business upon the legitimate theatrical profession.

Long before the iron hand of the law was invoked for the protection of children from rapacious and brutal parents, the starving and abuse of these miserable little slaves of the stage was both universal and treated as a matter of course. The travelling mountebank trained the children attached to the company by the liberal use of the whip, and bread and water in scanty rations punished any omission by the unfortunate child to comply with the requirements of his daily performance. Feats dangerous to life and limb by these unfortunate children were gazed on with amazement by the patrons of the show. Occasionally a fatal result was cured by the kalsomining verdict of a coroner's jury. Too often a single fall resulted in spinal injuries and death, after months of paralysis in a public hospital. Case after case occurred where these so-called gifted children were driven to an early grave. For the physical exertion of song and dance necessarily engenders nervous excitement; when the curtain rises a blast of hot air rushes from the auditorium on to the stage, thus increasing the perspiration caused by the physical exertions which follow; and then when the curtain falls there is a rush of cold air which rapidly checks that perspiration, and the result is a chill too often followed by fever and disease which speedily become incurable. And yet the sole object of all the exhibitions, disguise it as you may, is in reality to put money in the pockets of somebody, for these exhibitions are never given gratuitously and in every case there is somebody to be paid for the use of the children. And the whole of this alleged right to the money proceeds from the idea that the child is the property of the parent, that it may be starved, ill treated, or forced to do whatever the parent may see fit to compel, without any protection or redress whatever, unless the consequences are so serious as to amount to a felony.

In other words, these child-slaves of the stage, but for the present humane provisions for the law, would be subjected to a bondage more terrible and oppressive than the children of Israel ever endured at the hands of Pharaoh or the descendants of

Ham have ever experienced in the way of African slavery. Child-slaves they have well been called. Helpless and feeble from their tender years, they are unable for that very reason to invoke the provisions of the law enacted for their protection. They are really contending against the parents and guardians who happen to have control of them during their childhood. And when well-meaning people who constitute the theatre-going public unite with those parents and guardians, applaud the exhibitions, insist upon encores, and denounce as unfair and unjust the laws which are intended to prevent the premature wrecking of the constitutions of these little innocents, well may they despair of ever having an opportunity of earning an honest living, or of freeing themselves from the vicious surroundings, evil associations, and alluring temptations into which they are plunged by the avarice and cupidity of their parents.

The most curious phase of the subject is the attitude of the press in regard to these little slaves of the stage. Ordinarily its influence is always exerted on the side of humanity wherever little children are oppressed or ill treated. It has been the outspoken champion of their rights whenever these have been overlooked, and notably so in the case of their employment in factories, where child labor is but the prelude to permanent destruction of health and the precursor of an early grave. Yet if the sacred precincts of the stage are invaded, if an effort is made to enforce the law enacted for children's protection from premature exhibition in theatrical performances, at once an outcry proceeds from the press, not only against the law, which is denounced as oppressive, but against the action of societies charged with the duty of enforcing it, as fanatical, arbitrary, and unjust. The latter are denounced for preventing the children from earning an honest living, and public opinion is invoked by plausible editorials against any interference with them or their exhibitors, who reap a pecuniary benefit from their performances. Now, why is this so? What is the hidden motive or reason for this array of the press against the law and against the children it was designed to protect?

Let us examine the subject a little more closely. To the uninitiated such utterances are only the sentiments of a "free and enlightened press," as after-dinner orators are fond of phrasing it. In reality, it is nothing of the sort, but purely a matter of business. Newspapers are conducted for the purpose of making

money for their proprietors. Nothing pays so well as theatrical advertisements. A careful examination recently made shows that these advertisements are usually either of sixteen or twenty-five lines, that the charge per line for each insertion in the great dailies runs from twenty-five to forty-five cents, or from \$4 to \$7.20 a day for the sixteen-line notices and from \$6.25 to \$11.25 for the twenty-five-line notices ; so that a single advertisement of sixteen lines nets the paper from \$120 to \$187.50 a month, \$1,080 to \$1,687.50 a year, and an average of ten a day \$10,800 to \$16,875 annually. The twenty-five-line insertion nets \$216 to \$337.50 a month and \$1,944 to \$3,037.50 a year, and an average of ten such makes \$19,440 to \$30,375 annually ; the year being in each case computed at nine months so as to discard the summer months, when the theatres are chiefly closed. In round numbers, between \$20,000 and \$60,000 a year is derived by a first-class newspaper from its theatrical advertisements! The reader of the censuring editorial has only to turn to the theatrical advertisement column of the same paper for a complete solution of the motive of the article. Now, is it surprising under these circumstances that, with a view of retaining the patronage of theatrical managers, the real interests of the children are too often forgotten by the press in its desire to propitiate the favor of those who can withdraw at will, or transfer to other newspapers, these lucrative advertisements?

There are two sides to this subject—the side before the curtain, where the glare of the footlights and the external glitter, aided by the orchestra of the press, are apt to blind the perceptions of people who are naturally humane and who are amused by the apparent innocence of the “little tots,” as they are called ; the other side is that behind the curtain, where the real injury to the children presents the strongest plea in their behalf for a rational view of the subject, uninfluenced by plausible suggestions from those who seek to discount their future lives simply for their own personal and pecuniary advantage.

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